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Teveth II

Judaism and Rome

Kislev features the bright festival of lights marking the rededication of the Temple which was achieved through the spirit of the Hasmoneans and the courage of the Maccabees. Teveth brings us the sober memorial day marking the beginning of the downfall of the glorious state and Temple. Kislev represents victory over the Hellenic spirit; Teveth, surrender to Roman politics. These contrasts invite serious reflection and thoughtful consideration. Judaism must fear not Hellas but Rome, not the Hellenic spirit but the Roman mind. Roman inclinations brought about the destruction of all that is holy in Judah.

In the bright glow of the Chanukah light we remember the two inspiring intellectual forces which have enlightened mankind, the genius of Greek culture and the Jewish genius of the Divine Law. We are elated about the ancient prophetic vision of the effect which the Japhetic influence initially exerts upon the minds of mankind only to yield ultimately to the superior spirit of the God of Shem: יפת אלקים: ליפת וישכן באהלי שם ("God will open the mind of Japhet, but will dwell in the tents of Shem"—Gen. 9, 27).

Whenever Hellenic culture broadens its realm in the sphere of mankind Israel should rejoice. For this culture in its purest sense is but the blossoming pinnacle of human self-development. It presents no threat to Israel's mission on earth; rather, it makes a genuine contribution to it. The spirit of the Law which mankind is destined to receive from Israel anticipates enlightenment and lively development rather than the ignorance of dim-witted minds and timid souls. The enlightened mind is more receptive to the light of Jewish teaching. A soul ennobled by freedom is more appreciative of the bliss that awaits the adherents of the Jewish Law.

Certainly Israel is familiar with ordeals and conflicts imposed upon it by the Hellenic spirit of civilization. Mattathias' era was not the only one which was overwhelmed by a foreign culture that considers the re-education of the house of Jacob its major mission on earth.

Mattathias' era was not the only one when sons and daughters of Judah allowed themselves to be blinded by the glitter and allure of a foreign spirit, finding fulfillment in the self-discovered bliss of an erroneous concept of life rather than in the divinely revealed truth. They were tempted by Hellenic sensuality and abandoned the Law to join bacchanalian choirs. Mattathias' era was not the only one when Judah's vacillating sons and daughters regarded the Hellenic spirit of culture as a substitute, almost an antidote, to the Divine Law.

Israel's Sanctuaries have nothing to fear from the spirit of human culture emanating from Hellas. Israel greets the Hellenic spirit as a forerunner and helpmate of its own authentic mission, to enlighten and to civilize mankind, and has allied itself with the truth and humanity inherent in that spirit. Even when this spirit with its shortcomings and its excesses—as in the time of Mattathias—caused occasional lapses in Israel's midst, the "Light of Jewish truth" had already celebrated new victories, had already led to a new Chanukah, a new consecration of its ancient, eternal Sanctuaries.

Israel and its Sanctuaries had quite another relationship with Rome whose overwhelming onslaught marked the beginning of Jerusalem's catastrophe for which the Tenth of Teveth serves as a reminder. With daring heroism the men of Judea brought the Roman Emperor and their usually victorious legions to a perplexing standstill. It was not the Roman sword which subjugated Judea. It was the spirit of Roman politics which, since the days of Pompey, caught Judea in its snare. Roman viewpoints and inclinations were embraced with great enthusiasm by the leaders who controlled the destiny of the Jewish state. These leaders frequently repressed the Jewish spirit; it was they who undermined the Jewish Sanctuary and imposed Roman lackeys upon free Judea. They made Judea a "captive" of Rome long before the legionnaires hurled devastating fireballs into the Jewish capital.

If Israel desires to identify its most ruthless enemy, it must understand the Roman spirit. The Hellenes, from the beginning, enjoyed the tranquility and safety of their own soil where they flourished and brought to fruition all that is noble in man. In contrast, Rome's cradle, to speak in the traditions of our fathers, bears the inscription (Gen. 27, 40) על חרבך חיה; "your sword is your soil." That which was conquered by the sword could only be maintained and subjugated by the sword. While Hellas brandished the sword only in its prime and for its defense, Rome's very existence was the result of armed power. In

Obadia's words: "הנה קטן נחתך בגוים בזוי אתה מאד הודוך לבך השיאך שכני בחגוי: "See, I have made you small among the nations, you are greatly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you who lives in the clefts of rocks, who has a high dwelling place, who says in his heart, who will bring me down to earth" (Obadia 1, 2-3). Our Sages with great acumen and insight applied this to Rome, a Rome which was devoid of indiginous traditions בלא כתר (עבודה זרה י') and had scaled the rocky heights of political importance only by means of violence and aggression.

In contrast with Hellas' idealism, Rome's essential character bears the imprint of blatant material possessions. The value of objects and actions was determined by their usefulness. Rome had no use for anything that might elevate the mind and lead the soul toward self-reflection and ennoblement, no room for anything that might render man more humane. All respect for ethical conduct and human rights faded and warlike heroism and a skill in exploiting the weakness of other nations became praiseworthy virtues. Implacable and full of hostility towards outsiders, Rome demanded of her own sons subordination and devotion, the same military virtues that are required of a band of pirates. Even that loftiest of ideas called religion, and the concept of deity, were totally submerged in the expedient utilitarianism of the state's power. Religion, fear of gods and the priesthood were only used as tools for power. Religion and priests were used as a public facade to issue edicts which no one else dared to issue. Religion and priests were needed attachments to the rapacious claws of the Roman eagle. Priests and religion were held in high esteem only as a guarantee of their rulers' power. Culture and the arts became only a means of pleasure in the hands of the coarse materialistic Roman rulers. And this pleasure reached such a degree of mindless animalism and degeneration that depravity buried the last spark of humanity dormant even in the crudest of men. The desire for pleasure grew to such an extent that there was no longer anything sacred in the Roman world which was not degraded into a mere race for possession and pleasure.

Within, the craving for power and possessions lacerated the very entrails of Rome. Over the corpses of outlawed citizens, the victor, cheered by a populace won over by "Bread and Circuses," draped himself in the purple of a blood-stained toga. Beyond Rome, the legions carried its depravity across the sea and to other lands. Under the pretense of friendly alliances, under the flag of right and order,

under the cloak of the sacred office of a court of arbitration dispensing justice and peace, a policy was pursued which drew the very marrow out of its citizens leaving the dismembered and decaying bodies of nations in the graveyard of history.

It was at the time of the most intense degradation that the state of Judah came into contact with the Roman despots. Two brothers of the House of the Hasmoneans, contesting each other's right to the throne—which they had seized illegally—called upon one of the Roman governors advancing at the head of his legions to act as arbitrator. Jerusalem was lost at the very moment Jewish representatives appeared before Pompey's governor Scaurus, a century before the fall of Jerusalem. From that moment on Rome began to suck the blood of Judea and inculcated Judea's princes and nobles with the spirit of their system. They plunged the people into a sea of depravity and taught them the abuse of religion, temple and priesthood, as tools and means of power and self-aggrandizement. The spirit of Rome corrupted the soul of the Jewish Temple. In an angry response the majesty of God ceded the Temple and priests, king and throne to the Roman legions, and joined its faithful nation in its exile.

Let the recollection of the days commemorating this downfall act as a warning against the Roman spirit. We must fear Roman materialism, not Hellenic idealism.

Chanukah is followed by Teveth. The Hellenic spirit attempted to corrupt our Temple; it was thwarted. Initially Rome left our Temple intact; indeed, its hirelings restored, yeah surpassed its glory and wonders, and yet it was Rome that in the end destroyed our Temple.